

Building Ecosystems Statewide for Thriving (BEST) Youth Initiative



An Initiative of the Forum for Youth Investment

CALL TO ACTION

The current youth-serving ecosystem is comprised of a multitude of systems that are designed to address problems or provide opportunities to the same young people and families. While many states are engaged in efforts to coordinate and collaborate across this ecosystem, too often agencies are focused only on the issues that fall within their mandate. As a result, the burden is placed on young people and their families to try to access, sequence, and coordinate the various supports they need that are provided by multiple systems, rather than the systems aligning up-front to holistically meet the needs of youth and their families. None of these siloed systems can be effective in improving outcomes for youth without the services and opportunities provided by the others, resulting in all systems falling short of their larger aim: supporting young people to achieve their highest potential in education, work, and life.

Now is the time for states to create the enabling environments for true systems alignment that comprehensively and equitably meet the needs of youth and their families. Through the BEST Youth

Initiative, the Forum and its national partners will convene state teams representing leadership across systems, youth and families, and other stakeholders to work together to create a shared vision for transformation.

BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE OVERARCHING GOALS

Youth, families, system leaders and practitioners will work together to achieve collective impact – each stakeholder working towards a common solution to a problem that none could achieve alone, using a structured form of collaboration.



System leaders will know what reforms are needed, how to develop an actionable plan to advance them, and how to effectively implement them to create change.



System leaders and practitioners will be prepared and empowered to address the needs of all youth.



Policymakers at the state and federal levels will know what policy changes are needed to enable the youth ecosystem to improve outcomes for youth.

WHY THE BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE?

The Building Ecosystems Statewide for Thriving Youth Initiative (BEST Youth Initiative) is designed to help states move away from the current paradigm from one where youth and families navigate disparate systems, including **education, workforce development, human services, behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice**, to one where these systems are integrated and leveraged to provide cohesive opportunities to improve outcomes for young people that no one system can achieve alone.

The BEST Youth Initiative utilizes a youth and family-centered approach, engaging and amplifying the voices of youth and families with lived experience navigating multiple siloed systems. By including those with direct experience and knowledge of these systems, the solutions will be more effective, and the progress more enduring. (See "[Partnering with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change](#)".)

The Initiative will incubate and scale strategies based on sound policy and practice for achieving cross-systems alignment and integration at the state level while building and strengthening a [youth-serving ecosystem](#) that holistically supports young people so they can thrive.

ABOUT THE BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE

The BEST Youth Initiative is a three-year effort to facilitate state-based, cross-system, cross-sector collaboration to improve outcomes **for youth ages 5-24 in up to five states**. Teams from selected states will co-design and implement a data-driven, outcomes-based plan to

BEST YOUTH INITIATIVE METRICS

Percent of participants who report relevant and actionable learnings from peer-learning communities.

✱

Quantitative and qualitative insights on promising practices or innovations adopted by system leaders advancing a positive youth development (PYD) approach.

✱

Number of equitable youth development ecosystems built, shaped, and strengthened.

✱

Quantitative and qualitative data on co-designed and co-created innovative solutions implemented to improve youth outcomes.

✱

Funds invested or re-invested in outcomes-based efforts to improve the life prospects of youth.

generate cross-systems reforms and innovations towards a more effective and nimble youth development ecosystem, while informing policymakers about how to create a supportive policy environment to advance and sustain these efforts.

Each state team will be supported by a 2-person Forum Team comprised of Forum staff and allied consultant. The Forum Team will provide assistance to the State Teams throughout the analysis, planning and implementation stages of the Initiative, as well as in measuring progress and making any needed mid-course modifications.

The Forum Teams and partners will be assembled based on the subject-matter expertise and capacity needs of each state.

Experienced at engaging youth and families with lived experience, Forum Teams will support leaders in advancing a positive youth development approach that thinks holistically about young people beyond the doors through which they enter public systems. Forum Teams are proficient in supporting leaders working within a systems-change context, with skills and experience in facilitation, strategy development and implementation, program improvement, policy development and alignment, research synthesis, and data integration in a cross-system context. Importantly, Forum Team members have participated in systems change efforts directly and are knowledgeable about promising and successful reforms and innovations across the country. Forum Teams will also leverage the policy, program quality and measurement expertise of other Forum staff, as well as the Initiative's National Steering Committee (NSC) for Thriving Youth. (See the NSC description below under Initiative Support.)

The BEST Youth Initiative Phases:

- National Launch & Team Formation: In-person convening to launch the BEST Youth Initiative and its Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community. Cultivating team relationships and team building.
- State Action Laboratories: Customized consultation, advice and support in the discovery, strategy design and implementation phases of state innovations/reforms.

National Launch

The BEST Youth Initiative will launch with a two-day in-person convening in Washington, D.C., on July 30-31, 2024. Participants will include representatives from each BEST Youth Initiative State Team; the National Steering Committee; the Forum Teams; and other key stakeholders. This will be an opportunity to: 1) cultivate relationships with system leaders transforming systems in other jurisdictions; 2) share State's proposed reforms, elevating leading-edge innovations; and 3) Launch the Initiative-Wide Peer Learning Community and connect states to their teams.

State Action Laboratories

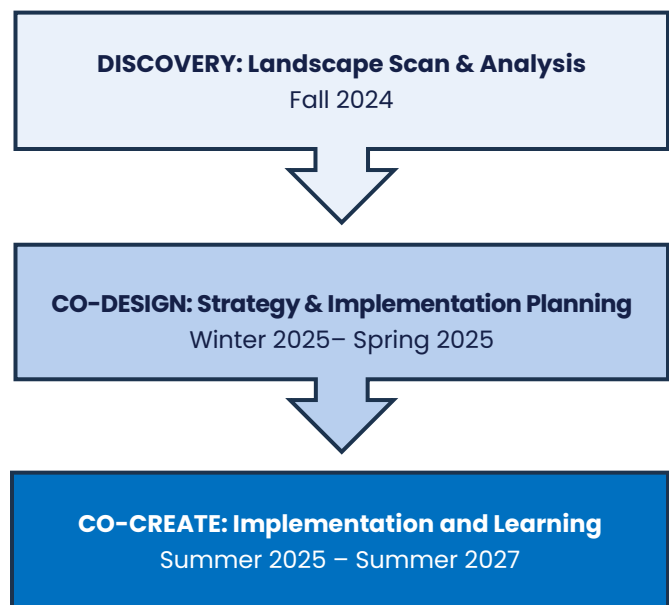
At the heart of the Initiative are the State Action Laboratories (Action Labs), wherein State Teams will co-design a strategy and implement a data-driven, outcomes-based plan to create cross-system reforms and innovations around an identified problem that can only successfully be addressed across multiple systems. State Teams will be comprised of multiple public sector system leaders, youth and family member/caregivers with lived experience, and other stakeholders (e.g., employers, children's cabinets, philanthropy, educators, nonprofit providers, and advocacy networks.)

In order to inform the Action Lab process with a diversity of experiences, an Advisory comprised of people with lived experience (PWLE) will be established. This Advisory will serve as a brain trust for the Forum Teams, create a dedicated space for capacity building, and act as ambassadors to other PWLE. (See "[Roles for People with Lived Experience in BEST Youth Initiative](#)".)

All processes will be structured to build relationships and understanding, while building the infrastructure and culture of collaboration, and the “muscle memory” for strategic problem-solving within and across youth-serving state systems. The Action Labs involve a three-stage process that states will move through based on where they are in the innovation cycle (identifying, building/refining, scaling). The process will be both structured and flexible – employing proven approaches to actionable strategy development.

State Teams might consider one or more of these, or other cross-systems innovations:

- Reimagined Funding Streams. Cross-system efforts to leverage a system-specific funding stream to fund other supports/services needed for multiple systems to be successful.
- Data Collaboratives & Integration. Multiple systems building on the data system of one system to create a more comprehensive picture of the impacts of their efforts to inform service delivery, program design and policy changes.
- Capacity-Building for Partnering with Youth, Families and Caregivers. Improving the ability of state systems to authentically involve youth and family members/caregivers with lived experience in defining problems and identifying policy and practice recommendations.
- Service Integration Between Systems. Two or more systems that create a seamless integration of services for shared beneficiaries.
- Innovative Approaches to Procurement and Contracting. Providers contracted by one system to address needs and outcome measures that fall within another system.



The Discovery and Co-Design stages will include: creating shared language and understanding of the identified problem; conducting a system and state landscape analysis to create a comprehensive picture of the opportunities and challenges to inform identification of strategies, goals and benchmarks for progress on the problem; developing an implementation and actionable measurement/learning plan; and identifying a collaborative infrastructure needed to build and sustain cross-system reforms/innovations. The bulk of the Action Labs – the Co-Create stage – will be supporting State Teams during implementation with as-needed coaching, facilitation and analysis, structured learning opportunities, and assisting with mid-course corrections as needed.

Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community

The Forum and its national public sector partners have heard from state system leaders that there is a need for a platform to meet, share ideas and brainstorm challenges related to working across systems. To address this need, an Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community will be convened throughout the BEST Youth Initiative that will include virtual meetings, in-person convenings and informal opportunities to build relationships within and across states. The convenings will be structured and facilitated opportunities to learn from and support one another, as well as identify policy changes/innovations needed at the state and federal levels to support their work. True to the essence of a peer learning community, the State Teams will drive the focus of the Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community. Additionally, opportunities for informal learning as well as an online community will be created to allow State Teams to communicate and provide mutual assistance at key inflection points throughout the Initiative.

Customized Technical Assistance

In addition to the support and subject matter expertise of the Forum Teams and National Steering Committee members, customized technical assistance is available for each State Team throughout the Initiative. State Teams will be encouraged to identify TA or capacity building needs during the Action Labs and Initiative Wide Peer Learning Community work. To provide just-in-time assistance, Forum Teams will have dedicated resources to garner or deliver the needed technical assistance. The Forum Teams will assemble a curated “bench” of technical assistance providers with expertise specific to the innovation of the State Teams to augment their expertise.

INITIATIVE SUPPORT

The Forum for Youth Investment

Founded in 1998, The Forum for Youth Investment (Forum) is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” with a vision that all young people reach their fullest potential – in education, work, and life. The Forum achieves its vision by advancing equitable youth opportunities and outcomes through high quality, customized capacity- building, convening, and relationship- building, as well as policy action across systems and sectors that comprise the youth development ecosystem.

With over two decades of working with local and national leaders to help communities implement positive youth development approaches serving children and youth more efficiently and effectively, the Forum has a deep knowledge-base and practical field-tested tools to support system leaders to plan and partner for impact, improve and align policies, and strengthen programs and adult practice across all settings where young people spend time.

The Forum is the Best Youth Initiative’s sponsor responsible for its design, implementation and oversight.

The National Steering Committee for Thriving Youth

Comprised of youth and family/caregiver representatives and leaders from key national public sector associations, the Forum has convened a National Steering Committee (NSC) for Thriving Youth to advise, guide, and serve as ambassadors for the Initiative. NSC members are integral to the BEST Youth Initiative in their capacity to provide a depth of experience, subject matter expertise and thought partnership throughout the Initiative, and with State Teams as

NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Youth with Lived Experience

✱

Family/Caregivers with Lived Experience

✱

American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)

✱

Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators (CJJA)

✱

Education Commission of the States (ECS)

✱

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
(NASMHPD)

✱

National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA)

resources and brokering relationships with philanthropy and/or thought leaders in the field or within relevant federal government agencies.

The NSC will meet quarterly, providing opportunities for relationship building across national public sector associations, updates on progress and challenges during the various stages of the Action Labs, as well as substantive discussion pertaining to Initiative implementation issues, policy implications, and shared learning.

Forum Contact: Please email BestYouth@forumfyi.org with any questions.